
Telling Parents

This is for everyone who's planning to tell their parents soon and to everyone whose parents know but just don't understand (I apologize in advance to FtM readers and non-transsexual readers. This is written in terms of a transsexual woman. I hope you can find useful insight regardless)...

As you may know when I came out to my mum last summer she was very accepting and supportive of me. This was mainly because of how she had come to think of me and our relationship in the time since I had come out to her as gay in January of the previous year. Accepting me as gay had been a terrible struggle for her, she hadn't rejected me in any way but she was concerned about how I would be treated, if I would have a happy life and so on. She says now that at first it seemed like a terrible thing to come to terms with but now it seems like nothing at all. At that time we began to talk a lot more and a lot more personally and our relationship shifted from parent/child to adult friends. I helped her through stress as much as she helped me. We talked about our feelings and found we had a lot in common. She told me things like how she too couldn't live a life where she wasn't doing something that would help people rather than exploit them and that she believed going to university was important not to learn facts but to learn /life/, that it gave you the opportunity to discover and reinvent yourself away from people who've known you since you were born or since you were a pre-teen. Our relationship was such that when I told my mum I was transsexual, she believed me and trusted in my judgement. She knew that I knew my mind and tried to understand myself and keep in touch with my feelings (we're long believers of the "it's good to cry" philosophy). She didn't doubt that when I said something I meant and truly believed it. That I would have thought about it and understood it and everything it would lead to. She talked about unconditional love and loving the person not the role. She said the most important thing was our happiness and she trusted in me enough to believe I knew myself enough to know what I /had/ to do to be happy.

I was very lucky to have such an accepting and supportive parent and to have gone through the previous coming out experience which brought us both to that point. However, just because my mum was supportive and accepting from the word go, she wasn't understanding. She trusted me to know what I needed to do but she didn't have /any/ idea what that meant. She was as scared and confused as any parent. Since then things have improved greatly and we've talked about her feelings during those first few months. I'm sure that all or at least some of this will apply to /all/ parents and I want to share them with you so you can go into coming out to your parents or educating your parents armed with the knowledge of the sorts of feelings, fears and misconceptions they will be holding...

- My mum had no concept of what it meant to be transsexual. She didn't understand it /at all/. Now my mum is a very intelligent woman and I assumed that as such she would be aware of at least the basics. She wasn't. At all. She told me at Christmas that she had spent the first few months expecting me to 'become' a transsexual. That I was going to live the rest of my life as 'a transsexual'. She had no idea of what that was. She'd been exposed to absolutely no role models of successful adult or youth transsexuals. As far as she knew she didn't know anyone else who was transsexual. In her mind I was going to become some kind of amalgamation of every half understood stereotype and

comment she'd heard for transsexuals, transvestites and drag queens and that I was going to live in some kind of transsexual ghetto with other transsexuals or walk the street in a ball gown and full make-up calling everyone 'dhaarling!'. None of it was really that clear. She had no concept, she could only imagine. And parents always imagine the worst when they face the unknown. I first became aware of this when my mum, some months later, asked me questions like "what will you wear when you... er transition?" and "well what will you do?". Many parents would be too proud to ask questions like this, especially if they've decided that you're doing the wrong thing (it would be like saying "You haven't thought this through at all! It's completely the wrong thing for you! ...um, what does this involve again?"). The correct response to this question is to say "I'm just going to be like any woman my age, I'll dress like any of your friends 20 year old daughters would, when this is finished I'll just be a normal girl."

Of course the truly correct way to deal with this is to make sure your parents understand from the start that you will just be a normal woman (or man if you're going in that direction) when this is all over. You really need to make this clear, it's not a conclusion they'll come to on their own. Show them pictures and websites of successfully transitioned transsexual women your age, let them see they're just normal girls getting on with their life and relating to the world as normal girls. You're not turning into a freak you're turning into just another person. The only difference is you'll be the other sex and a lot happier.

- She had no concept of what hormones would do, of when surgery happens and when it can't happen or, perhaps most importantly, of the concept of passing. She didn't understand what hormones would do and what they wouldn't do. She realized they would give me breasts but I've met people who didn't know that -- don't assume they know anything no matter how obvious. She didn't put passing into the equation at all, in her mind hormones would have no effect on me at in other people's eyes. No logically I'm sure she could have thought that through and realized that I was going to look different but she /wasn't/ thinking logically. I became aware of this when I noticed that she had all sorts of fears about the rest of my life living in constant danger.

Again, explain from the start how hormones work. Show your parents impressive pictures of perfectly passing transsexual women your age. Tell them that in twelve months time you will look more like a sister or female cousin than the person you look like now. Explain the simple things, fat redistribution, skin texture, breasts and how people judge other people's sex. She told me once that she'd had a revelation looking at other women in the street and realizing the sheer diversity in size and shape of people that society has no problem calling women. Before this point she'd had the completely illogical belief that I'd have to look like a cheer leader to pass. Your parents might have complete blind spots in their mind about tall people being able to be women if the tall person in question is you...

- She believed that I'd live the rest of my life alone without love. That I would never be able to find a loving partner as a transsexual. The thing she was most concerned about was my ability to live a happy and successful life and she didn't have any concept of transsexuality being compatible with that. She told me this when I came out to her. I was very surprised considering how happy and confident I was that I was going to be loved and liked as a gay man. She didn't see that as a woman I'd be more likely to find a partner than as a gay man. She didn't understand that I was becoming more normal not less. Yet again she had a lot of positive gay role models and no positive transsexual

women role models.

Explain that you'll just be like any other woman your age and just as likely to find happiness, love and success as any other woman. Use words like 'woman' rather than transsexual, talk in terms of your self and your life being female and normal. You're not becoming a freak, you /feel/ like a freak now. You are /far/ more likely to be happy and successful in life after transition than you ever were before.

- She had a lot of trouble seeing me as female when I looked male. She's said since that she sees me completely as female now but when she first found out about what I was going through she had never thought about things in that way. Again she told me this on our walk around the Whistable coast line when I came out to her. She said that she didn't think I /was/ very female, that yes I looked female and my body language was but she didn't think I acted like a girl. I asked her what she meant and she came out with things like I was assertive and hungry to learn.

Explain the difference between gender and gender roles and stereotypes. Ask your parent if perhaps they might be being extremely sexist, perhaps if you turn it around and said, "if it wasn't me but instead some other girl, would you seriously tell them they couldn't be a woman because they want to learn things or because they ask questions and get things done?" ask them are they seriously saying all women are content to be unassertive and ignorant? Parents can be extremely sexist about what makes a woman when attempting to prove to themselves that you're not. Help them to see that what they're saying would most probably offend or even disgust them in any other context. I told my mum that gender is the way we think and feel about ourselves as men and women whereas gender roles are all the stereotypes, baggage and 'rules' that society piles on top of men and women. There's nothing biological in women to make them /all/ likeable people who do all the housework and love pink and there's nothing biological in men to make them /all/ fast car loving, competitive sports fans...

- My mum felt terrible and guilt stricken to discover that I had been miserable, uncomfortable and depressed all through my childhood and /she hadn't noticed/. She found it very difficult to cope with the amount of pain this meant I'd gone through on my own. Months later she told me how much this thought upset her and how she was having difficulty forgiving herself for not noticing. She said she'd noticed I wasn't happy during some of my teenage but that she'd assumed the door slamming, lack of visible friends and staying in bed all day were down to hormones not depression.

I sent my parents a long email explaining how much they'd done for me as I grew up, how while I was very depressed at school, home was always a haven and happy place for me and the only place I really felt I had any chance of being myself. How although I knew that if I had been a girl from the very start I'd have had a much more happy school and social life and I wouldn't have chosen to do the same things with my life, I always made the most of the situation I was in, I read, I programmed computer games, I played pretend with my brother, I built an awful lot of lego and I sang in the privacy of my own room. Perhaps I wouldn't have done the same things if I hadn't been transsexual, but they were still a good childhood, even if it was a compromise childhood and all the best parts happened when I was at home. With my parents.

OK, that's all the insight I'm giving today. I hope you can keep this advice in mind when tell your parents and when you're helping them to understand and accept the situation they'll feel

suddenly thrust into.

Although this didn't come direct from my mum, I hope this more open ended advice will also be useful:

Remember your parents are most likely, shocked, scared, guilty and confused. They don't understand what you've gone through, what you are going through and what you will be going through. Most likely their first reaction will not be a positive as my mum's. Depending on personality and situation they may decide to fall into the parent role and, all though they're in no state to do so, decide what's right and wrong for you without any of the relevant information needed to make this decision. It's quite likely they will go into denial, maybe they'll pretend it's not happening, maybe they'll blame something or someone completely irrationally and say that you've been corrupted. Only you know how your parents are likely to react to such feelings as shock, fear, guilt, confusion and even loss (your parents may think of you as a son rather than a person in your own right). Your parents may not be able to cope with any kind of shift in how they perceive, treat and think about you, at least at first. There may also be additional guilt if you've ever told them this before and they didn't believe you or told you it would go away. Even more if they shipped you off to a psychologist when you were 12 and then never talked about it again. Any of these reactions will most likely cause you a lot of pain. It's very likely that you've learnt to relate to at least one of your parents with some degree of argument or confrontation as you grew up.

Here's the important thing. Bear everything I've said today in mind. Don't feel offended, don't even get upset. Stay rational, stay calm and keep your parents feelings in mind. You owe it to your parents to /help them/ through this. Do not expect any kind of support or understanding from them, don't expect /anything at all/. Take any comment that you might find offensive or upsetting or rejecting and /give them the benefit of the doubt/. They don't know what they're talking about, they don't know how to react, how to help or how to make this better. They don't understand and they're scared. HELP THEM. If you thought they deserved to know then they also deserve to understand, to know exactly what's going to happen to you and /not/ to lose you because of this. Don't let this turn into a conflict, do not get angry, don't take any comment they make personally. When your parents say something that suggests ignorance or fear, don't get angry, don't storm off, don't cry. Use every rejection, ignorant comment and attack as a cry for help. Learn from what they say to you, find out what they don't understand and /explain/ it to them, slowly and rationally. The most important thing is that you talk. Talk as much as possible. Let them know everything that's going to happen. Give them /a lot/ of time to get used to the idea and give them /a lot/ of information to read as they do. Show your parents that you think, show your parents you know what you're doing, show them your confident, show them that /you/ are the rational one here, that /you/ know the facts and that /you/ are going to be there to help them through this. If they argue with you or shout at you or doubt you /do not lower yourself to their level/, you owe that to them. Help them through this, they don't want to lose you, they don't understand, they're afraid. No matter what other concerns they have -- what other people think, how this will affect their marriage, if you're being corrupted or delusional -- when it comes down to it your parents want you to be happy and successful and loved in your life. Realize that even the most withit and understanding parents can have trouble understanding that you can be happy /and/ deal with your transsexuality. They may realize that your transsexuality makes you miserable, they may understand that transition will make that better, but most likely they won't realize that going down the path of transition does not close off the paths to a happy, successful life. Help them to see that if anything transition opens /all/ the paths and makes everything

easier in the long term.

Just remember an ignorant comment is not the cue to a shouting match, it's a cue to you that your parents don't understand something and you need to explain it to them with kindness, compassion and understanding. Don't drop to their level. They'll thank you later.

Since I talked everything through with my mum things have improved immeasurably. She talked everything through with my Dad and we've all become closer. After a few months they became comfortable with calling me Zoe and using female pronouns all the time. They began apologising if they got it wrong. After a while my mum began to truly think of me as female and become quite upset or even confused if others got it wrong. After a lot of pushing by me to talk about it to her friends, my mum told a number of people close to her in her life through which it began to feel even more normal to her. Before Christmas my mum told all of my relatives of my situation. She did this by phone and in person, in each case describing it in terms of me being a girl who'd struggled through life trapped by the wrong body until now when I was finally being myself and putting things right. Edited copies of my webpage helped. Since then I've received nothing but support and acceptance from all my relatives and I'm certain such a universally positive reaction is down to the way my mum presented the situation to them. At Christmas my mum told me that when she tells people who don't know about what's happened in my life they all tend to tell her how sorry they feel for her and how terrible it must be. She said that she doesn't really understand that, how it really doesn't feel like a bad thing and in a funny way it just seems like a normal and natural part of growing up to her now. With hindsight she'd noticed certain things. She says when we were looking around universities in early 1998 she'd seen me coming out of the men's toilets at a motorway service station surrounded by business men and lorry drivers and how completely delicate and out of place I'd seemed and how I just don't look incongruous any more. Things can work out with your family.

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